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ABSTRACT

This document describes the guidelines followed by the author in writing books for reluctant or unskilled teen-age readers and discusses the techniques which should be used when helping these readers to understand and appreciate what they read so that they will want to continue reading. In addition, the document contains questions for discussion (never for written work, which might discourage reluctant readers) concerning five books written by the author: "Andy," "Your Bird Is Here, Tom Thompson," "I've Missed a Sunset or Three," "Song of the Shaggy Canary," and "A Five-Color Buick and a Blue-Eyed Cat." Also included is a separate packet which accompanies the novel "Andy" ("The Night Summer Began" in paperback) and consists of detailed discussion questions for stimulating readers' thoughts about problems pertaining to the characters' and their own lives. (JM)

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TO LIBRARIANS AND TEACHERS
WHO CARE
ABOUT STUDENTS WHO DON'T READ

FROM

PHYLLIS ANDERSON WOOD

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USING EASY-TO-READ NOVELS AS DOOR OPENERS FOR RELUCTANT READERS

Most writers of novels for young people start with the basic assumption that someone out there wants to read. They are correct, of course; there are many enthusiastic young readers. But teaching in a high school reading lab gives me a different perspective. I am constantly reminded in my work that there are growing numbers of teenagers who do not read books for pleasure . . . or maybe do not read books at all. It is for these youngsters, first and foremost, that I write. The fact that people who already have the reading habit also can enjoy my books comes as an extra bonus.

Having chosen the rusty readers as my target group doesn't place me in competition with other authors. The needs of all types of young people should be met. It does mean, however, that if I am going to lure reluctant or unskilled readers into a book and keep them there till the end I'm going to have to do a lot of things differently.

Technique-wise this means writing by a new set of guidelines: starting the story on page one; keeping the number of characters low; letting the dialogue carry the action; simplifying language, sentence structure, and paragraph construction; avoiding sophisticated flashback and change of focus techniques; and keeping the overall length short.

I don't view this as a downgrading of literary quality or a sellout to popular tastes. Rather, I consider it an updating of writing methods to meet the existing needs of a new generation of inexperienced readers--capitalizing on techniques that work, and doing it with a careful craftsmanship that strives for a blend of simplicity, polish, and style.

Using new techniques, however, doesn't guarantee any kind of success unless the book speaks to the young readers about the things that matter to them.

For the past five years I've been watching enormous changes come over the young, and it seems to me that many writers have been mis-reading the cues. While young adult novels have been becoming what adults call increasingly "realistic"--embodying more and more cynicism, disenchantment, sexual permissiveness, and antagonism toward adults--the young have been moving in the opposite direction.

Surveys made in 1973 and 1974 by such opinion research organizations as Daniel Yankelovich, Inc. (reported in the New York Times and Newsweek Magazine) and Gilbert Youth Research Division (reported in Herff Jones MOOD OF YOUTH) are revealing that young adults today are once again leaning heavily toward the basic traditional values, seeking fulfillment in marriage, children, love, a good family life, financial security, a good job, self satisfaction, and achievement of career goals. The things that seem to matter to the young these days are the human relationships . . . people caring about people . . . feelings . . . responses.

This demands of the author a kind of new old-fashioned book, or an old-fashioned new book. Anyone writing this kind of book to please these new readers, however, must face one predictable problem. Reviewers who are not really close to the young and haven't sensed this new trend will write these books off as "naive, overly sentimental, and wholesome." This is a moment of truth when the author has to decide if he's writing for the reviewers or the young readers.

Personally, I'll choose the youngsters and take my chances with the reviewers. It's well worth the risk when some student closes one of my books with a satisfied air and announces, "That's the first book I ever read all the way through . . . have you got any more like it?"

When someone in my classroom does achieve this rare moment of sweet success, how do I treat it? Very tenderly. I recognize that this is a monumental breakthrough, discovering that a book can be absorbing and fun, and I wouldn't want to risk killing it with a written assignment or test. Since reluctant readers usually are reluctant writers, too, I would consider it unwise and unkind to use this moment of success as a time to expose their writing weakness.

On the other hand, even though a written assignment might demolish the newborn enthusiasm, these same readers often are eager to talk about the characters and situations they've unexpectedly become involved with--<u>if</u> the talking is on a no-risk basis; i.e. no oral reports, no grades for knowing or not knowing answers, and no public embarrassment. My own preference is to give the students a chance to discuss their reading with me on a one-to-one basis whenever they finish a book. This is possible because all instruction in our reading lab is individualized.

I think it's important to remember, too, that there will be some students who want to keep the novels to themselves. I accept this as a perfectly reasonable response, even in a classroom, and I honor their wishes. I always say to a student who has completed a novel, "Shall we talk about your book, or would you rather not?" Given a choice, most students like to talk--when the setting is right.

Since the kind of novels I write are meant to create a climate of fun and involvement about reading, I have strong feelings about how they should be used in a classroom. I know that teachers are subject to the pressures of accountability--the need to <u>prove</u> that something has been accomplished, that progress has been made, that time and taxpayers' money have not been wasted. This pressure can make a teacher feel obligated to subject all student reading to the standard classroom academic scrutiny, questioning, and testing. And when this process begins, the fragile pleasure the student may have experienced in reading the book can easily be shattered.

I would suggest, instead, that suitable measures of accountability would be 1) that the student finished the book, 2) that there was some visible sign of pleasure in reading the book, 3) that the student wants to read another book.

This, after all, is the reading pattern we hope to have the student carry over into his adult life. Why, then, just because it's happening in a classroom, should teachers need to create artificial tests and measurements to turn a pleasurable activity into a work task?

The only time I see a need for any questions on my novels is when an unsure reader wants reassurance that he really did read a book successfully. Inexperienced readers seem to feel good about the books and themselves when they can answer some questions easily. For this purpose simple plot review questions that are achievable by even the most unskilled reader are in order. And whenever the student has trouble with a question, I would suggest that the teacher and student <u>together</u> try to recall the incident in the book, so that it takes on an air of sharing rather than becoming a battle of memories.

The use of only simple plot questions does not mean that the novels have no other dimensions worthy of consideration beyond plot. It simply means that the reader can be credited with the ability to grasp these ideas without assignments, book reports, or tests.

When this approach is used--that is, when a teacher has expectations of success for a young reader and there is no need for proof of accountability except to himself--this new reader often will find the courage to go on and try another book . . . and another. And this is how the easy-to-read novel becomes a door opener for turned-off readers.

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Because questions or assignments can so easily turn the unenthusiastic reader away from books, the questions offered here are suggestions for discussion only, never for written work. And, considering the hazards involved, I would use even these discussion questions with caution and restraint.

ANDY by Phyllis Anderson Wood
The Westminster Press 1971
Paperback (retitled: THE NIGHT SUMMER BEGAN), Scholastic March 1975

The summer after high school graduation, when Andy's long-time friendship with Jan ripened into love, was also the summer when he and Jan helped their friends, Bruce and Roxanne, who were trapped by pregnancy into a hasty marriage.

The novel ANDY is meant to be a sensitive and intimate reading experience. With this book, more than most, any questions would be entirely inappropriate unless the student really wants to be questioned and feels comfortable with the situation.

PLOT REVIEW:

1. How had Andy and Jan come to know each other so well before this summer?
2. When did Andy first realize that something new was happening to their old friendship?
3. How did their first date of the summer--the Saturday night movie--end up being just like a lot of other Saturday nights they had known in the past?
4. What things did Jan and Andy enjoy about their day at the river when they double dated with Bruce and Roxanne?
5. When Jan got upset after the Fourth of July fireworks and ran home without any explanation, what was it all about?
6. When Jan had to babysit on a weekend, what did she and Andy do to make it fun?
7. Why did the dinner with Bruce and Roxanne at the Spanish restaurant flop?
8. What plan did Bruce and Roxanne come up with when they were sure she was pregnant?
9. How did Jan's parents get into the planning for Bruce and Roxanne? What new suggestion did they come up with?
10. How did Bruce and Roxanne's parents react to the news?
11. When Andy and Jan went to Aunt Mildred's to help prepare for the wedding, how did the evening work out?
12. What happened to Andy during the garden wedding ceremony?
13. What news from Mrs. Kozlow was waiting for Jan when she arrived home after the wedding?
14. How did Andy feel after Jan had left for Denver?
15. What did Andy send to Jan in Denver? Why did he choose that special kind of remembrance?
16. What gift did Andy finally select for Jan?
17. Why didn't Andy give Jan her gift when she got off the plane at the airport? What spot did he choose for presenting it?
18. What gift had Jan brought to Andy from Denver?
19. What proposal did Andy make when he gave Jan her gift? What was her answer?
20. What are your favorite scenes in the book?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

What do you think will happen next to Andy and Jan? What are their future prospects? What problems are they likely to face? What factors may help to make their relationship lasting? What problems will Bruce and Roxanne have to face almost immediately? What problems may arise later on?

YOUR BIRD IS HERE, TOM THOMPSON by Phyllis Anderson Wood
The Westminster Press 1972
Paperback, New American Library (Signet) Late '75 or Early '76

Tom Thompson, who views himself as a loser, is sent as a flunk-out to the district's continuation school. A canny seagull with a broken wing, a warm girl named Bonnie, and a friend who can't read manage to turn Tom into some kind of a winner. (Movie and TV rights purchased by Walt Disney Studios.)

PLOT REVIEW:

1. Why was Tom sent to Longford? How did he feel about being sent there?
2. What kind of help did Tom give Lou? How did Lou help Tom?
3. How did Tom happen to find the bird? How did he get it home?
4. Where did Tom meet Bonnie? What problems did he have finding her again after their first meeting?
5. What happened to Tom's plans to take Bonnie to the beach to exercise the bird?
6. When the bird became so active in the house that he was messing up the carpets, what choices did Tom's father offer him?
7. At first, how did the bird react to his new home? What did Tom finally have to do to make the bird happy with it?
8. How did Tom and Bonnie make it possible to recognize their bird in a crowd?
9. Why did Lou join Tom and Bonnie in going to the beach after his job interview?
10. How did Joe Bodin turn a normal school day into Black Wednesday?
11. How did the principal discipline Tom? How did the students punish Joe?
12. When Tom was in class after his return from suspension, what message came from the office? What did he find when he rushed into the courtyard?
13. How did Tom suggest that Joe get back in good standing with the other students? How did the idea work?
14. Who took command during the school bus free-for-all and saw to it that Tom got the rear window seat? What did Tom do in return?
15. What are your favorite scenes in the book?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

-In what sense did the seagull create a turning point in Tom's life? Since most people don't have a seagull, what other kinds of turning points are there?

-Why do you think the seagull was so important to the Longford students? What do you think would have happened if the bird refused to take Joe's offering?

-By the end of the book how is Tom dealing with life differently from the way he handled things when he started at Longford? What factors do you think have played a part in his change? How many of these same factors are present in most people's lives, if they can learn to recognize them and use them?

I'VE MISSED A SUNSET OR THREE by Phyllis Anderson Wood
The Westminster Press 1973
Paperback, The New American Library (Signet) March 1975

Jim, a turned-off kid, who is lost in his own gray world, meets Rachel, a frightened girl who has never had a chance to be part of any world. Together they grope their way from bad times into better times.

PLOT REVIEW:

1. What was Jim's problem at the beginning of the book?
2. In what ways did Dave try to help Jim?
3. How did Rachel act toward Jim at their first meeting? Why was she this way?
4. How did Jim get involved with Arthur?
5. Although Jim originally thought he would take Arthur to the Center for help and then vanish from Arthur's life, what made Jim go back to the center?
6. After the argument when Rachel told Jim not to bother seeing her home because he "might get involved", what realization slowly dawned on Jim? How did he feel when he finally understood the truth about himself?
7. When Jim and Rachel made peace after the argument about involvement, what agreement did they reach that would make it easier for them to help each other?
8. What good things came out of Jim's blow on the head when the gym door hit him?
9. What caused Rachel to run away from home? Where did she go? What do you think made her come back?
10. How did Jim bring Rachel out of her state of shock?
11. How did Rachel and her father come to an understanding after she had run away? What facts did she learn about her mother? What did she learn about her father's feelings for her mother?
12. What new agreement regarding Rachel's activities did she and her father reach? How was this put to its first test?
13. How did Mr. Cordero get involved in the Center?
14. Why did Arthur lose the airplane contest? How did he take it? How did Angie take it?
15. By the end of the book, how has Jim changed? How is Rachel different? What are some of the important factors that have helped bring about these changes?
16. What are your favorite scenes in the book?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

-What form of dropping out of life had Jim taken? What other ways of dropping out can you think of? Why do you think this happened to Jim even when he had a good home and loving parents?

-Why do you think Mr. Cordero was so unpleasant to Jim over the phone? What new responses did this arouse in Jim?

-What does the title of the book mean to you?

SONG OF THE SHAGGY CANARY by Phyllis Anderson Wood
The Westminster Press 1974
Paperback, New American Library (Signet) Late '75 or Early '76

Sandy, an unhappy teenage divorcee trying to finish high school so she can support her baby, and John, a young man feeling out-of-step after his discharge from the service, are drawn together by their loneliness and isolation from the rest of the teenage crowd. The ultimate growth of their friendship into love, heightened by their common concern for young Chuckie and for the patients at the nursing home where John works, brings the beginnings of an emotional healing process and starts them planning for a future together as a family.

PLOT REVIEW:

1. How had Sandy been emotionally hurt by her early marriage? How did these wounds show up at unexpected moments when she was with John?
2. What problems did having a baby create for Sandy?
3. What problems was John trying to deal with?
4. Why did the night school class become such a big thing to Sandy?
5. What gift from the Strombergs prompted John to reveal his inner hurts to Sandy? Where were they when he did so, and why was this a logical place for sharing feelings?
6. Why do you think Sandy took off from the gas station the way she did when Linda appeared? What would you have done if you had been in that spot?
7. How did Sandy's plans go astray on John's graduation night?
8. When Linda reappeared and John disappeared from Sandy's life, what activity did Sandy get involved in to fill the emptiness?
9. How did Chuckie brighten the lives of the patients at Hill Haven?
10. With Linda out of John's life, what activities during the springtime drew Sandy and John closer together?
11. Why was the purchase of the canary for Hill Haven such a big thing to Sandy?
12. What was John's long range plan for himself and Sandy and Chuckie?
13. What did John choose as a graduation gift for Sandy?
14. What secret did Mrs. Stromberg share with Sandy? How did Mrs. Stromberg seem to feel about Sandy?
15. Why did John and Sandy decide on an early marriage even though they both had school ahead?
16. What was Mrs. Stromberg's wedding gift to Sandy and John? What do you think this gift meant to her?
17. What happened to Chuckie during the wedding supper?
18. What created the misunderstanding between John and Sandy in the emergency waiting room?
19. When did John finally receive his graduation gift from Sandy? Why was it a meaningful gift?
20. When Chuckie refused to leave the hospital, what was bothering him?
21. What are your favorite scenes in the book?

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:

-Do you think Sandy was correct when she felt girls without babies were carefree?
-Why was the night school sewing class a turning point in Sandy's life?
-What do you think of the wedding vows Sandy and John took? What would you change?
-What do you think the final scene when John calls roses "Woses" shows about the way John and Sandy will handle domestic problems with different approaches?

A FIVE-COLOR BUICK AND A BLUE-EYED CAT
by Phyllis Anderson Wood
The Westminster Press 1975
Junior Literary Guild Selection April 1975

Using a fourteen year old home-customized Buick, Fred and Randy are hired to handle pickups and deliveries for the Palmer chain of pet shops. They are assisted by Laurie Palmer, the boss' teenage daughter, who does the bookkeeping for the team. Although transporting live pets creates unexpected and challenging problems, Fred's father creates even greater ones when Fred tries to get him to recognize his need for a driver's license, car insurance, a five-color Buick, and a cat named Ginger Blossom who goes with the Buick.

PLOT REVIEW:

1. What was Mr. Palmer looking for in his hiring of two new helpers?
2. What did Randy and Fred have to do before Mr. Palmer would definitely hire them?
3. What were Laurie's responsibilities with Palmer Pets?
4. What went wrong on the first delivery job--getting Princess to the Northwood Shop?
5. What went wrong on the shipment of dogs from Seattle? How did the airline treat the kids? How did the kids handle the mixup?
6. How did the Buick's horn create problems for Randy on two different occasions?
7. What did the Highway Patrolman seem to suspect when he stopped the Buick on the freeway near the airport? Why didn't he write up a ticket?
8. What problems arose on the way to Valley Center? How did the kids handle the situation? How did this turn out to be good for the Valley Center Pet Shop's business?
9. When they left Valley Center to go back to the city, what problems did Singapore Sadie and Ginger Blossom create? How was this problem taken care of?
10. Later in the summer when Fred felt his father still wasn't fully convinced that he was working for real money, what did he do for his parents?
11. What chance did the kids have to help Fred's father in an emergency situation? How did Fred's father feel about being seen this way?
12. When one of Fred's father's business friends saw him in the Buick, how did the friend react?
13. How did Randy turn that brief meeting into a future business deal?
14. When summer was ending and Mr. Palmer called Randy in for a conference, what was on his mind? What worried Randy about Mr. Palmer's offer?
15. What was Fred's father's reaction when Fred had to get a definite decision from him regarding insurance and buying the Buick? Do you think his father already had decided and was "putting Fred on" . . . or do you think it really was that hard for him to agree?
16. What requirements did Fred's father lay down regarding the Buick?
17. When the news came out that Ginger Blossom went along with the car, who was most delighted?
18. When she finally got her hands on Ginger Blossom, how did Sally get into the same situation she had gotten into with Princess?
19. Where did Ginger Blossom finally show up?
20. What are your favorite scenes in the book?

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